

A Brief Biographical Sketch
of Samuel B. Wilson

~ Samuel B. Wilson

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A BRIEF BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF SAMUEL B. WILSON WRITTEN BY HIMSELF

Samuel B. Wilson was the youngest son of John & Mary Wilson. He was born in Lincoln county North Carolina on the 17th of March 1783. His Father emigrated at an early day from Pennsylvania, & settled on Crowders Creek, near Kings Mountain, where he resided until his death. He raised a large family, five sons and three daughters. His circumstances though not affluent, were easy & comfortable. To his second son Robert G. Wilson he gave a liberal education. After giving him the best classical education that his vicinity afforded he was sent to Dickinson College Pennsylvania where he graduated during the Presidency of Dr. Nesbit. He devoted himself to the Gospel Ministry & laboured with expectation & success, first in ^{Long} ~~Sons~~ Cane, Abbeville District, South Carolina, then at Chillecothe Ohio; from this station he was called to the Presidency of the University of Ohio, at Athens, which Office he filled until his advanced age induced him to resign, & seek the retirement & quiet so desirable to Old age.

Samuel B. Wilson was fourteen years old at the death of his Father. He had at that time received but an imperfect English education. In his Father's Will it was left to his choice, to take a small Tract of Land as his portion of the Estate, or to relinquish to his Brothers his portion of the landed estate & receive a Classical & Scientific Education in place of it, provided his brothers would consent to this arrangement. At the consent of all parties it was agreed that his brother William should take the land willed to Samuel by his Father & expend its value in giving to Samuel a good education. After prosecuting his studies for four years in Latin, Greek & Mathematics under the best Instructors; he entered Washington College at Lexington Va then under the Presidency of the Rev. Geo. H. Baxter D.D.

Before he had entered on the studies of his Senior year, his funds were all exhausted. This was a sore trial to a young man at a time when no aid had

been provided by the Churches to help those who were in straightened circumstances. During his Senior year he taught in a private family, & at the Same time attended to all the Studies of the College Course & graduated with the class.

On the subject of a Profession his mind had long been settled. Having enjoyed the benefit of Christian instruction from his childhood, his mind & heart, were early impressed by divine truth, & before the fourteenth year of his life he made a public profession of religion. The grace of God, which had take root in his heart at this early period, had often seemed to languish under the withering influence of temptations & trials, so perilous to inexperienced youth. An overruling Providence, however had kept him from open transgression, & he who had begun the good work, according to his promise, had carried it on. Drawn & constrained by the love of Christ, he had resolved to live not to himself, but to God who had done so much for him. And looking around on all the fields of usefulness, he saw none, which seemed to have stronger inducements, or to present to him higher claims, than the Gospel ministry. The motives which induced him to go & preach the Gospel were not of a worldly nature. If wealth, honor & luxurious indulgence had been the objects of pursuit, another profession would have been chosen; but gratitude to God who had bestowed on him all the gifts of nature, Providence & grace, & compassion for perishing sinners, strongly urged him, to engage in this work, while the glorious recompense in a future state was neither forgotten nor disregarded. His Theological studies were directed & superintended, first by Dr. Baxter, & subsequently by the Rev. Samuel Brown, Pastor of New Providence. During the whole course of his Theological Studies, he had to provide the means for his board & clothing by teaching a school. This incessant & long-continued labour, greatly enfeebled his health.

In the Spring of 1805, He was licensed to preach the Gospel by the Presbytery of Lexington, at Timber Ridge Church. After lucensure, he was commissioned, together with James Hoge, now Dr. Hoge of Columbus Ohio, to missionate for a few

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months to the destitute Churches on the waters of Jackson & Grosnbrier Rivers. This commission was fulfilled at a time of great interest on the subject of religion, among the churches of that region. The service was attended with no little difficulty, on account of the Jirks which were then prevalent in most of the churches, & the activity of other denominations who strove to turn away many from our connection during the religious excitement. The resolution adopted by Mr Hoge & himself during this missionary tour was neither to commend or condemn the Jirks. They were led to this resolution by the fact that some persons of undoubted piety were subject to the Jirks, while others were also affected by them who gave no evidences of piety, & some few were distinguished for their wickedness. In preaching they presented the distinguishing Doctrines of divine Grace, as strongly & clearly as possible, taking care to avoid technical terms, & using Scripture language alone. On this plan they found their labours quite acceptable, & not unfrequently, the most unqualified approbation was given by Members of the Methodist Church to the strongest Calvinistic doctrine.

Having finished the work assigned him by his Presbytery in Virginia, he resolved to visit his relations in Carolina, & spent the summer & fall of 1805 chiefly in labouring in the church of Fair Forest S.C. It was his purpose to visit the towns & cities in Georgia & S. Carolina late in the autumn, but Providence hindered & he returned to Va.

His friend & Instructor Mr. Brown, had procured for him a Commission from the Gen^l Assembly to spend two months as a missionary in Fred^sburg & its vicinity. About the last of December, he set out very reluctantly to fulfill this Mission; for he had set his heart on a settlement at Lebanon & Windy Cove, two small churches where he had while a student often held prayer meetings. On the first Sabbath in January 1806, he preached his first sermon in Fredericksburg.

Religion at that time, was in the lowest state, & iniquity abounded. The

Episcopal Church, was supplied by a Rector, enfeebled by age, & not distinguished for learning, zeal or piety. Few resorted to it for worship on Sabbath morning, the only time during the week, when they were accustomed to assemble in religious exercises. Among the Methodists & Baptists, some pious people were to be found; but with only a few exceptions their preachers were illiterate men. The religious education of children was neglected. The Bible was excluded from their schools, & a large portion of the educated population were either avowed or practical Infidels. Luxurious living, intemperance & gambling were common among those who held the first rank in Society. The want of fervent & intelligent piety in the clergy; the Infidelity that invaded our Country subsequent to the Revolution, & the instruction & example of Infidel Teachers who had charge of the education of Youth, had brought on this state of Society, amidst a wealthy intelligent, refined & hospitable people.

The first few weeks of his Mission among these people, were spent amidst much despondence & great discouragement. To see the Sabbath desecrated by ordinary business, & vain amusements; to witness open transgression & to hear even Youth glorying in their shame, was so different from all that he had witnessed in his previous life, that like Paul at Athens his spirit was stirred within him to see a people almost wholly given up to vice & wickedness. Another discouraging circumstance arose from his necessary expenditure in the prosecution of his Mission. The cost for his board & the keeping of his horse greatly exceeded his wages, & in the whole Town & its vicinity he could find only three Members of the Presbyterian Church.

The state of affairs, however soon began to assume a more favorable aspect. Preaching was continued regularly twice every Sabbath, & as often during the week as suitable places could be found to accommodate the people. The Attention of the whole Community was waked up; & crowds came to hear & see what this new thing meant. God was pleased to grant his aid & blessing, & many who came like Zacheus full of curiosity were cut to the heart by the sword of the Spirit &

returned home to meditate & pray over what they had heard.

Before two months had expired several persons obtained a good hope thro' grace, by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. Many inquiries began to be made of the young Missionary, such as these, why did you come to preach to us? By whom were you sent? What compensation do you get? & By whom is it paid? When these questions were answered, their minds were filled & their hearts affected with views of Christian benevolence, entirely new to them. They immediately declared they were willing & able to pay for the Missionary services they had enjoyed & proceeded forthwith to contribute more than double the wages due to him, accompanied with several valuable personal presents. By the time this short Mission closed, so deep an interest was excited in the place for the return of the Missionary, that an earnest petition, signed by twelve gentlemen of the town, was sent to the Presbytery of Lexington, requesting that body to take measure for his ordination & send him to labour statedly among them. This petition was laid before Presbytery at their Spring Meeting held at Bethel in 1806. At the same time a call from the united churches of Lebanon & Windy Cove, was laid before Presbytery for his services as their Pastor. Called, in the Providence of God to decide, now, between this call from churches, where he had labored holding Prayer meetings & exhorting while a student of Divinity, & to which he was strongly attached, & the invitation to occupy a difficult but interesting field in Fredericksburg where he had recently laboured as a Missionary he felt embarrassed & resolved to lay all the facts in the case before Presbytery & submit the affair to their decision. In view of the whole case Lexington Presbytery advised him to go to Fredericksburg & made arrangements for his ordination in the month of August next following.

The orderings of Providence, which directed his location in Fredericksburg, were so peculiar that they deserve to be recorded here. In the summer of 1805 soon after his license, an invitation was sent to him to take charge of the Academy & Presbyterian Church in Raleigh the Capital of his native state. The

letter, on account of his journey to the South, did not fall into his hand until about six months after it was written. Toward the latter end of 1805, he replied to this letter stating the reasons why it was not sooner answered, & presuming from the lapse of time that other arrangements had been made in Raleigh, no specific reply was made to their invitation. He then visited the Town of Fredericksburg as before stated, & in the following Spring the invitation from the Capital of his native state was renewed, when in the judgment of his Presbytery it had become his duty to locate in Fredericksburg.

The first thing that turned his thoughts to Fredericksburg as a field of Ministerial labor was a conversation with the Rev. Mr B. while he was a student in Washington College. This young Minister in his travels had spent one Sabbath in F. & preached there; & gave such a view of the population, & the intelligence of that people & its destitution of sound religious instruction, as led him to resolve at the time that should God spare him to enter the Ministry, he would visit that Town. At a subsequent period however, he received such a statement of the infidelity & wickedness of the place from an older Minister who had visited them that in hopeless discouragement he had given up all intention of going there & would gladly have declined to fulfill the Missionary appointment his friend Mr Brown had procured for him; but as Mr B. objected to this, he resolved reluctantly to fulfil his appointment.

By these marked interpositions of Providence he was prevented from accepting a flattering & lucrative invitation from his native state, & thwarted in his intention to locate amidst a people to whom his first juvenile labors had been devoted, & who were very desirous to obtain his services. How manifest is it that God overrules all things that concern his church & his people.

On the 17th of March 1806, he was married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Matthew Hanna of Lexington Va & soon after visited Fredericksburg a second time, where he laboured until Summer; when he returned to the Valley & prepared for his ordination which took place in August of that year. In this solemn service,

after passing through all his trials to the satisfaction of Presbytery, the ordination Sermon was preached by the Rev. Wm McPheeters D.D., subsequently of Raleigh N.C. from the text "Do the work of an evangelist. 2 Tim. 4:5 & the charge was delivered to him by his friend & beloved instructor in Theology the Rev. Samuel Brown of New Providence. In the Autumn of 1806 he took up his labor in Fredericksburg. Presbyterianism was but little known in that place. Some missionaries & travelling Ministers of that denomination had occasionally preached there, & by a few were remembered with respect & affection. Nearly the whole of Low Virginia, had been originally settled by Episcopalians, & they chiefly occupied that region prior to the Revolution. After the Rev. Samuel Davies left Hanover, & Dr Waddell the Northern Neck, it is believed, no Presbyterian Church existed on tide water prior to 1806, except in Norfolk. The settlement of Dr John H. Rice in Richmond, & Dr B. H. Rice in Petersburg took place at a subsequent period. On surveying the field of labour which he had chosen, he soon perceived that before the objects he had in view could be accomplished, a radical change must take place in the education of youth, & the discipline of the church. The former had either been in the hands of infidels, or those who totally neglected Christian instruction. The Bible was a book unknown in their schools, & but little read at home. Indeed the opinion was often & openly expressed that it was an improper book to place in the hands of children & youth. The state of religion was, in general, exceedingly low, & the deportment of many professors, was little, if at all, better than avowed worldlings, & far from what the Gospel requires. To elevate the standard of Christian morals, would rouse the indignation of the whole mass of ^{proud} ~~pressed~~ & worldly, & pleasure-loving professors; & to undertake the education of youth, & place it on Christian principles, was a burdensome, & to many an offensive task. Duty to God & love to souls required both, & the work was undertaken.

The doctrines of the Gospel preached plainly & fully, while they were the power of God to salvation to many, were offensive to carnal men. The effects

indeed were such as our Saviour foretold would attend the publication of his Gospel. Households were divided, & what should have been Glad tidings, of great joy to all, became the occasion of strife & bitterness. To such a height was this carried that many believed the young Preacher would be compelled to quit the new field of his labour. Providence however ordered things otherwise. It is true, his support as a preacher was reduced so low, that he could not have maintained his family upon it, but Parents estimated his labours as a teacher of youth so highly, that his school was always full to overflowing, & thus his family were provided for; while an important change was effected on the youthful mind of the community, by imbuing it with bible truth, & bringing its doctrines & precepts to bear in their conduct. While thus engaged in preaching & teaching it was his usual habit to spend six hours daily five days in the week with his pupils & to preach twice on the sabbath, & lecture on Wednesday evening, besides receiving & paying visits. In these laborious duties he continued for several years, until declining health compelled him to relinquish his Male Academy. Though feeble in health & suffering from the effects of hemorrhage from the lungs & urged by his Medical friends to decline public speaking, he still continued his Sabbath & weekday services, among his beloved people, resolved rather to wear out in his Master's service, than to spend his days in doing nothing.

Relieved from his confinement in school, for six hours a day, his health soon began to recruit. But as the infant church was not yet able to support him, he engaged to spend a few hours daily in the instruction of Females; an employment he greatly loved, & in which he continued until his Church grew strong enough to support him, after which he accepted a call to become their Pastor & devoted himself wholly to their service. The place in which on his arrival he found but three members of the Presbyterian Church, but no House to worship in, & no organized Society, was blessed of God, with hopeful cases of conversion nearly every year up to 1820. The church was organized in 1808, & each communion

season some were added. Two season of revival were enjoyed, & during the whole period of his Ministry between 400 & 500 Members were added to the Church.

During his Ministry in Fredericksburg he received several calls to other fields of labour. The College Church in Prince Edward invited him to become their Pastor; & twice was he chosen President of Davidson College N.C. None of these could induce him to leave the beloved church which he had gathered, & fed for so many years. In 1841. after the death of the Rev^d. George A. Baxter D.D. He was chosen to the Professorship of Christian Theology in Union Seminary Va. To this call, he felt his duty to yield, & after the Pastoral relation between him & his people was dissolved, he was inducted into his office in September 1841.

Transcript of autobiographical sketch of Samuel B. Wilson, taken from the original manuscript in Archives Room of Union Theological Seminary on December 8, 1956, by Mrs. E. D. Witherspoon, Jr.